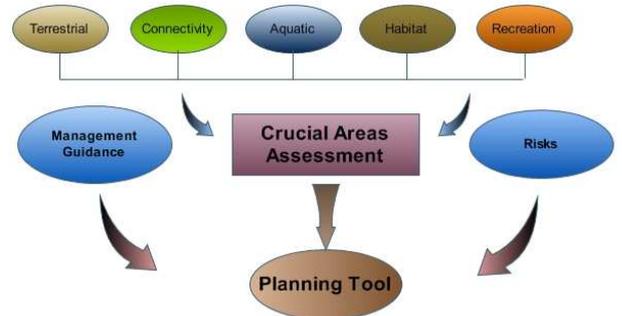


## Montana's Crucial Areas Assessment and Planning Tool *A Refinement to the Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy*

### Why?

In October 2005, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) completed the Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CFWCS), a landscape level plan identifying aquatic and terrestrial focus areas important to species and habitats of "Greatest Conservation Need". As the CFWCS began to be implemented, its scale and lack of inclusion of terrestrial game and sport fish, FWP lands and other recreational values were realized. In addition:

- Development pressures have continued to mount from a variety of sectors, including residential growth, proposed energy development, and transportation project planning. FWP has traditionally provided data to its constituents through personal contact and/or GIS data on the FWP Web site. Interpretation of those data has been left to the developer, planner or conservation organization.
- These pressures created a significant demand on Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) staff to provide more refined information on our fish, wildlife and recreational resources, ensure that areas with greatest conservation values were identified, and in areas with lower values, standardize mitigation of the adverse effects of development.
- Western Governors Association (WGA) has focused efforts on energy and land use development and crucial areas and corridors through their "Crucial Areas and Corridors Initiative".



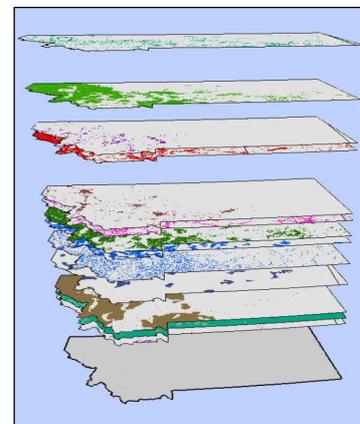
### Commitment and Goals:

In January 2008, the FWP leadership committed to conduct an assessment of fish, wildlife and recreational values in an effort to identify crucial areas and fish and wildlife corridors. The Assessment is part of a larger conservation effort that recognizes the importance of landscape scale management of species and habitats by fish and wildlife agencies. Accordingly, FWP has begun reorganizing technological, human and fiscal resources to better meet this need, with tools that will better enable FWP staff, industry and partners to take a proactive approach to management.

### Assessment Outcomes

The Assessment is building upon the CFWCS approach by analyzing and ranking the landscape for its value to "species and habitats of greatest conservation need" which will now include socioeconomic valued species, habitat integrity and field staff biological interpretation.

1. Data layers identified, ranked and prioritized for Montana's landscape for crucial habitats and connectivity for their biological importance:
  - Terrestrial game and sport fish; Species of Concern and Species Richness; habitat metrics for integrity, riparian and wetlands.



- A Connectivity Assessment including corridors and linkage zones for identified focal species will occur in 2010.
  - Recreational use and economic value and designated/protected lands.
2. "Risk" Assessments" data layers were identified for energy including: oil and gas, wind and transmission; land use and residential growth, transportation and climate change
  3. Management Guidelines for each risk category were developed to provide clearer guidance on how to avoid or mitigate negative impacts to fish, wildlife and recreation resources.
  4. A web-based "Pre-planning tool " that exposes the results of the Assessment will be publicly available through the FWP Web site <http://fwp.mt.gov>. in the spring 2010.
  5. Incorporation and integration of the Assessment products into the planning and management processes of state, local and federal governments; organizations and industry.
  6. Update and revise Montana's CFWCS (State Wildlife Action Plan).

### The Assessment

Each of the data layers have been ranked on a 1-4 scale based on the measured values within the layer. The final Crucial Areas Assessment will be based on a 4- tier approach that will provide a graduated scale of value from crucial to common. The aquatic prioritization process will use sport fish quality, species of concern distribution, watershed integrity and native fish assemblages. The terrestrial prioritization process will also be produced, using terrestrial data that include game species, species of concern, species diversity, landscape metrics, and riparian and wetland values. Connectivity for aquatic, semi-aquatic and terrestrial species (including corridors and linkage zones) will be analyzed and incorporated into the Assessment. The Assessment is scheduled to be completed in January 2011.

